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SUBJECT: Secretary Rice's Meeting with Colombian
President Alvaro Uribe

1. (U) January 25, 2008; 3:30 p.m.; Medellin, Colombia.

2. (U) Participants:

United States
The Secretary
Ambassador William Brownfield
Representative Melissa Bean
Representative Eliot Engel
Representative Jane Harman
Representative Alcee Hastings
Representative Ron Klein
Representative Rick Larsen
Representative Solomon Ortiz
Representative Ed Perlmutter
Representative David Scott
A/S Jeffrey Bergner, H
A/S Sean McCormack, PA
A/S Tom Shannon, WHA
A/S Daniel Sullivan, EEB
S Chief of Staff Brian Gunderson
Director of House Affairs Scott Kamins
Deputy Executive Secretary Kevin Whitaker
Carolyn Cooley, Embassy Notetaker

COLOMBIA
President Alvaro Uribe
Ambassador Carolina Barco
Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos
Minister of Interior and Justice Carlos Holguin Sardi
Minister of Culture Paula Moreno Zapata
Social Protection Minister Diego Palacio
Acting Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism Eduardo
Munoz
National Planning Director Carolina Renteria
Director of Social Action Diego Molano Aponte
Director of Presidential Program for Human Rights Carlos
Franco
High Commissioner for Reintegration Frank Pearl
Vice Minister of Labor Relations Andres Palacio Chaverra
Governor of Antioquia Luis Alfredo Ramos
Medellin Mayor Alonso Salazar Jaramillo
MFA U.S. and Canada Coordinator Patricia Cortes
Presidential Press Secretary Cesar Velasquez Ossa
Presidential Advisor Jose Obdulio Gaviria Velez
Presidential Advisor Jorge Mario Eastman Robledo
Presidential Advisor Carlina Restrepo Ruiz
Presidential Private Secretary Alicia Arango

3. (SBU) SUMMARY. President Uribe outlined his
administration's progress on security and social issues.

He noted that Colombian government support for labor
rights began prior to ratification efforts, and he
reviewed recent government actions to address U.S.
concerns, including the addition of new prosecutors and
investigators, increased funding for protection programs
and the judicial system, and labor reform legislation.
Uribe underscored Colombian government efforts to
prosecute human rights violators and promote respect for
human rights in the military. He said the Trade Promotion
Agreement (TPA) remains key to attracting foreign
investment and reducing poverty, and encouraged a
Congressional vote prior to the presidential elections.
The Secretary emphasized the importance of recognizing
Colombia's progress. END SUMMARY.

COLOMBIA: ADVANCING SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY

4. (SBU) In a January 25 meeting with the Secretary and
nine Members of Congress, President Uribe thanked the
delegation for its interest in Colombia and stressed the
importance of the bipartisan support under Presidents
Clinton and Bush. He reviewed Colombia's progress during
his administration, including regaining territory
controlled by illegal groups, reducing unemployment by
two-thirds, increasing the real minimum wage by 10
percent, providing an additional 13 million Colombians
with health coverage, strengthening democratic
institutions, combating impunity, and recovering public
optimism. Despite these improvements, Uribe acknowledged
more needs to be done and emphasized the TPA's role in
accomplishing the Colombian government's long-term
security, economic, and social goals.

TPA: THE TIME IS NOW

15. (SBU) Uribe said the TPA will encourage foreign investment, create jobs, and strengthen his "democratic security" policy. He said that to create better paying jobs, Colombia needs the high level of investment the TPA would bring. Contrasting Colombia to Chavez's authoritarian government and state-run economy, Uribe pointed out that TPA approval would signal support for shared democratic and economic values in the region. He urged the Congressional delegation to vote quickly on the TPA before the distraction of the U.S. presidential race made Congressional debate impossible.

16. (SBU) Acknowledging that some of the delegation might not agree on the urgency of the TPA, the Secretary said no problem in Colombia will get better if the USG does not ratify the TPA. It would be a mistake not to recognize Colombia's progress. She observed that Colombia provides an inspiration throughout the world for those attempting to overcome civil conflict.

LABOR RIGHTS: ONGOING IMPROVEMENTS

17. (SBU) Uribe said his administration's determination to protect trade unionists began his first day in office and plays an integral role in his "democratic security" policy. He underscored the link between a strong and independent judiciary and combating impunity, noting he had doubled the justice administration budget. Uribe added that he had recently approved a 12 percent staffing increase in the Prosecutor General's office for new investigators and prosecutors. Since 2001, the Prosecutor General has convicted 134 individuals guilty of violence against unionists. The Colombian government recently increased Ministry of Labor staffing to monitor employer compliance with labor laws.

18. (SBU) Uribe noted that 1, 959 of the 9,444 Colombians receiving protection under the Colombian government's USD 40 million protection program are trade union leaders, and 128 are journalists. He reported the murder rate for trade unionists is now lower than that of the general population. Before he entered office, there were over 250 trade union murders annually. In 2007, this dropped to 26 cases.

19. (SBU) Uribe summarized the three labor reform bills submitted to Congress to bring Colombian laws in line with International Labor Organization (ILO) standards. The first would ensure benefits (e.g., minimum wage and social security) to cooperative workers. The second would shift the power to determine the legality of public sector strikes from the executive branch to independent labor judges. The third bill would mandate an increased period of employer-union negotiation prior to requiring arbitration. Representative Klein said approval of the ILO-compliance bills would be essential to demonstrating GOC commitment to labor rights.

110. (SBU) Uribe attributed much of Colombian trade unions'

opposition to the TPA to ideology rather than policy concerns or labor violence. He said many public sector unions oppose the TPA because of disagreements with the Colombian government over its recent restructuring of the state-owned oil company Ecopetrol. Still, he said the majority of private sector unions believe the TPA would prove beneficial to labor.

SECURITY: JOINT OPERATIONS

111. (SBU) Uribe said that when he took office, 30 percent of the country was under Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia control and 40 percent under paramilitary control. The Colombian government now has a security presence in every municipality. Minister of Defense Santos outlined the military's measure of success { the amount of territory reclaimed from illegal organizations. Asked by Representative Larsen about inter-service cooperation, Uribe described joint operations across military branches and across government ministries. He said the military works with other government agencies to bring social assistance, including doctors, teachers, and judicial administrators, to rural areas. He likened the Colombian government's efforts to defeat terrorist and narco-groups to a diet where the first pounds are easy to shed but the last prove more difficult. Uribe stressed the importance of ongoing USG support until the task reaches completion.

EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS: RARE AND PROSECUTED

112. (SBU) Uribe said his administration did not tolerate human rights violations when Representative Harman asked about extrajudicial killings. He said the government supports judicial investigation and sentencing in the isolated instances where the military did commit a crime. Defense Minister Santos added that earlier in the week, the military had introduced a comprehensive policy for human rights in armed forces operations, noting that almost every military operation would require the consent of a human rights legal advisor. Citing a recent poll, Santos said the armed forces had an 80 percent approval rating { higher than either the church or media { and that such high approval ratings could not exist if the military regularly violated human rights.

RICE